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John Peterson
(3 July 1945 – 19 October 1972)

{Insert photo: John Peterson}

Directorate of Plans (now the Directorate of Operations)
Operations Officer

GS-09

(U) John Peterson was killed in Laos on 19 October 1972 when the helicopter in which he was a passenger was shot down. It crashed and burned after being hit by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) ground fire.

(U) John Peterson was born in 1945 in Germany after his family fled Latvia, just as that small Baltic country was being overrun by Soviet forces. In 1950, under the US displaced persons program, John and his family immigrated to America. They arrived by ship in New York harbor, and John later emotionally recalled seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time. Getting off the ship posed problems, since John had contracted measles during the long trip. Under US immigration laws and regulations, this contagious ailment normally would have meant automatic quarantine for John. But the ship's doctor, whom the family had befriended, managed to clear the five-year-old and his parents for entry into the country. Ultimately, with help from a local church, they settled in Boston, later moving to the small town of Bellingham, Massachusetts.

(U) Once the family was settled John taught himself English by listening to records and radio programs. He adapted quickly and became thoroughly "Americanized." As a youngster, John worked as a newspaper carrier in Bellingham and received a number of honors for his reliability and excellence in that job. He joined the Boy Scouts, and worked his way up to the top rank of Eagle Scout. In high school John was an honor student and an athlete, participating in cross-country track. After high school graduation in 1963, he attended Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. He majored in physics, where he had the opportunity to be taught by some of the notable physicists at Bell Labs nearby. John somehow managed to find the time to participate in his favorite activity, the Rugby Club. While at Drew he also met his future wife, [redacted] John graduated from Drew with a Bachelor of Arts degree in physics in 1967. (b)(6)

(U) After graduation, John's dream was to become a writer. He was accepted by several journalism graduate schools, including the prestigious Columbia University School of Journalism in New York. However, with the war in Viet Nam in full swing, he felt compelled to serve his adopted country, and he enlisted in the US Army. He entered the military in September 1967 at Fort Dix, New Jersey. He first attended Officer Training School at Fort Benning, Georgia, but soon discovered he wanted to be in Special Forces, which was at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. There he completed training in late 1968, and then volunteered for assignment to Vietnam. He served in Kontum and Pleiku, until his discharge as a Green Beret sergeant in the fall of 1969. During his Army tour, John met several CIA officers and learned about the Agency's growing role in the war effort in Southeast Asia.

(S) Newly married, John joined the Agency in June 1970 as a contract officer with the Special Operations Division in the Directorate for Plans (now the Directorate of Operations). In short order he completed the Junior Officer Training Course, jump school, and the Basic Operations Course. Trained in CIA operations, hardened by military experience in Viet Nam, and anxious to return to Indochina, John and [redacted] were sent to Pakse, Laos in June 1971. She worked as a contract clerk typist at the CIA unit, and he served as a paramilitary operations officer working with a 1,300-man multi-battalion Group Mobile (GM) of armed Lao irregulars. Their primary objective was to defend southern Laos and to interdict supplies and troop movements along the Ho Chi Ming trail. John's duties were advising the field commanders and managing the deployment of the GM, to include outfitting, paying, training and inserting irregular troops into the areas of operation. As a skilled and imaginative operations officer, he developed new techniques for motivating his often reluctant troops, as well as teaching them innovative tactical concepts. John was both popular and effective. His native name was TAMAK. (b)(6)

(S) John Peterson, in short, was fully engaged in Agency operations to counter the most extensive offensive yet undertaken in Laos by the NVA and the Vietcong. By fall 1972, Agency officers in Laos were advising and supporting nearly 40,000 irregular troops in operations that tied down elements of at least four NVA divisions, preventing them from joining the war against the South Vietnamese government and its US allies.

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(S) In order to effectively insert his troops into conflict, John often was present at the infil sites. Although accompanying the troops as they landed at the HLZ was admittedly risky, he was committed to lead by example and to ensure that all went as well as he had planned. Infils were usually made in helicopters. Because of the constantly changing military situation in Laos, the rugged terrain, and the difficult-to-discern demarcation line between friendly and enemy-held territory, John and his co-workers were often flying over enemy territory. These flights were always dangerous.

(S) It was on just such a flight, on 19 October 1972, during a troop infil operation, that John Peterson was killed when his helicopter, rising above the tree line, was struck by enemy ground fire near Saravane, Laos. From approximately 100 feet the helicopter crashed and caught fire. John Peterson was fatally wounded in the accident. Because of extremely rough terrain and the high concentration of enemy troops in the area, his GM troops carried John's body through the jungle for two days before they could find a safe HLZ where John's colleagues could land and retrieve his remains. He was 27 years old when he was killed.

(S) John was posthumously awarded the Agency's Intelligence Star for his courage and sacrifice. He was survived by [redacted] his wife.[1] (b)(6)

[redacted] (b)(6)

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